



# Fire Prevention and Resilience in California

A POLICY BLUEPRINT FOR GOVERNMENT LEADERS



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## INTRODUCTION

The devastating fires in Los Angeles County underscore the urgent need for proactive measures to reduce wildfire risk and improve community resilience in California. While no preparation can entirely prevent tragedies when 100 MPH winds ignite urban canyons, there are practical steps local and regional leaders can take to better prepare for the next wildfire.

Local elected officials can play a critical role in reshaping state policies and overcoming bureaucratic obstacles that have long hindered California's wildfire preparedness. Working collectively, local authorities can marshal the political, financial, and legal resources needed to dismantle the thicket of counterproductive laws, regulations, and bureaucracy that have undermined California's ability to prepare for fires, and pave the way for more effective fire prevention strategies.

This moment calls for a candid assessment of the policies that have exacerbated wildfire risk. Despite good intentions, environmentalist-inspired regulations have contributed to water and energy scarcity, reducing our ability to fight fires effectively. These same policies have also limited responsible forest management and the proactive clearing of brush from urban canyons—practices essential for wildfire resilience.

The recommendations below provide a roadmap for enhancing fire prevention and readiness across California, empowering leaders to protect their communities from future disasters.

## 10 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Support legislation that streamlines the approval process for projects that deliver more water, and repeal legislation that deters investment in more water infrastructure. In particular, state legislators should either **repeal the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA)** altogether, or at the least, take away the right of third-party private attorneys to file lawsuits pursuant to CEQA, which often will delay, if not stop, badly needed fire prevention strategies including brush removal, prescribed burns, and grazing.
2. **Repeal Senate Bill 1157** and related legislation that enforces permanent water rationing on California's households and businesses. This intrusive law will squander an **estimated \$7 billion** to save a scant 440,000 acre feet of water per year. But its ultimate impact will be to slow, if not stop, efforts by urban water districts to increase their supply capacity. Under countless disaster scenarios for which we may have no advance notice, stripping all surplus out of our capacity to store, treat, and distribute water can have devastating consequences.
3. Work with local fire department officials to identify fire-prone neighborhoods and adjacent open space and send crews annually to clear overgrown fuel. The procedures to do this are **well established**; we just haven't done enough of it. Fast track the approval process (hours, not months) for applications to perform the work. Then use all available tools and techniques to reduce overgrown vegetation — goats and other grazing animals, prescribed burns, and mechanical thinning.

4. Bury power lines. All of them. Everywhere. Secure state and federal funds to help pay for it.
5. Revise building codes to improve the many standards that already exist to protect homes against wildfires. Eliminate combustible exteriors, install windows with tempered glass, and require fire-resistive roof underlayment, non-combustible fences and decks, closed attics, or attics with ember-resistant vents that are sprayed with fire retardant interior coating.
6. Encourage private residential pool construction with the condition that they include, as this [well-prepared homeowner](#) suggests, “a 3–inch suction line in the deep end with a standpipe at the street to allow firefighters a guaranteed source of water.”
7. Embrace the concept of resilience instead of retreat. At 4,790 per square mile, California has the [highest urban density](#) in the United States while only 5 percent of California’s land is urbanized. Fire risk in the urban-wildland-interface should inspire us to prevent fires or withstand fires in these areas, not force Californians into increasingly dense urban cores.
8. Resist the regulatory assault on permeable surfaces that both percolate runoff, transpire valuable moisture into the atmosphere, and reduce urban heat island impact. For example, tear up artificial turf and replant grass on athletic fields. Instead of forcing homeowners to abandon lawns, simply ban use of pesticides and herbicides on lawns. We are not taking advantage of the potential for [well-hydrated urban landscapes](#) to increase humidity and resist ignition.
9. Work with Explorer Scout troops, homeless services, county corrections officials, community colleges, local fire departments, and other community organizations to recruit and train a firefighting reserve corps. Drawing on well-established criteria for training volunteer fire brigades, but scaled up, create an army of firefighting reservists that undergo annual refresher training and are on call whenever disaster strikes.
10. Reimagine firefighting and fire prevention to save money and improve results. Work with private and public fire agencies and private entrepreneurs to procure and test not only systems to remotely detect small fires before they become big fires, but also next-generation technologies such as water carrying, [firefighting drones](#) and [autonomous robots](#) designed to march into canyons to cut and remove brush. There is no reason why small cities and agencies cannot have someone looking into these opportunities and make small investments. Accelerating the development of these innovations may be the final decisive step necessary to make the experience of cataclysmic wildfires recede into history.

## CONCLUSION

The scale of the ongoing tragedy in Los Angeles County defies description. But it doesn’t have to happen again. With decisive action and smart policies, California leaders can reduce wildfire risks, protect communities, and prevent future disasters.

*Edward Ring is the co-author, along with Steve Hilton, of [Modern Forest Management](#) (March 15, 2024), a report from Golden Together that is essential reading on the mismanagement of California’s forests that includes additional recommendations for state and federal reforms that should be enacted to advance effective wildfire prevention.*